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ABSTRACT

Timed writing exercises used at the University of the Ryukyus (Japan) to help alleviate common problems in English second language writing are described. It is proposed that Japanese students have difficulty writing in English because of early training in the grammar-translation method, a lack of communication skills, the overuse of bilingual dictionaries, the passive acceptance of and extreme dependence on teacher instruction, and inert classroom behavior. It is argued that exercises requiring more rapid writing are effective because they encourage novice writers to overcome their writer's block and consider content over form, give much-needed opportunities to write, promote thinking in English, increase confidence, and prepare students for later writing tests. The exercises discussed follow six steps: (1) selection of a familiar, two-sided issue; (2) small group discussion; (3) teacher facilitation; (4) brief thought period; (5) 7-10 minutes of concentrated writing; and (6) evaluation for style, content, and structural accuracy. Suggested activities include explanation of statistical data from newspapers or magazines, use of pictures and diagrams for topics, and interpretation of short articles on familiar topics. Criteria for evaluating writing exercises are offered, and problems encountered with the technique are examined. Student responses to the approach and research needs are also discussed. (26 references) (MSE)

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Brant M. KRESOVICH

Abstract

Japanese university students often have much difficulty writing English rapidly. Composing so slowly is a discouraging disadvantage in acquiring writing skills because it makes most written work in English time-consuming, boring, and frustrating. This short paper will present exercises designed to increase the writing speed of students in Japan. Checking methods and student reactions will also be discussed.

論文要約

英作文のクラスに於けるタイムド・ライティング活動について

英語科外国人教師
ブラント・M・クレソヴィッチ

日本学生は一般的に英文を書くのが遅い。この拙論は学生の文章力を上達させるためのタイムド・ライティング活動について述べたものである。

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Japanese university students are notoriously slow in writing English. One reason for their lack of writing speed might be their instruction in the *yakudoku* (grammar translation) method in Japanese high schools and universities (Imamura, 1978; Hino, 1988). Perhaps as a result of such traditional training, Japanese learners attempt to focus on content and form simultaneously. Other reasons for a lack of writing speed might include a general lack of communication skills, incessant use of bilingual dictionaries, passive acceptance of and extreme dependence on teacher instruction, and inert classroom behavior (Dissoway, 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to present various timed writing exercises designed to improve the writing speed of Japanese university students in an EFL setting. I will first discuss the advantages of practicing writing more rapidly. Second, I will give information on the English composition classes in which students do these activities. Third, I will give some examples of the exercises. Fourth, I will explain the criteria and methods I use to check student work. Fifth, I will detail problems from the viewpoint of both student and teacher. Finally, I will present findings of an informal questionnaire which attempted to determine student reactions to the exercises.

THE ADVANTAGES OF TIMED WRITING EXERCISES

The first advantage is that, like the quickwriting technique[1] described by Jacobs (1986), timed writing exercises separate the process of creating from the process of editing. In other words, after students temporarily cease being overly concerned with syntax and editing, they can lend their full attention to developing ideas and finding words to explain them. Thus, this technique directly addresses a major writing problem of Japanese students: their tendency to mull over what they want to say and how best to say it at the same time and thus produce uninspiring prose so slowly. In extreme cases, the fear of making grammatical errors may be so great that some students are simply unable to write (Kresovich, 1988a). This technique teaches students to make it a rule to set aside editing problems until they have explored and expressed their ideas (Zamel, 1983; Britton, 1983).

A second advantage of timed writing exercises is that they give students the opportunity to write often. Research on writing skill acquisition for both native and non-native learners indicates that if students have this chance frequently, the quality of their written work will increase (Walter, 1987; Briere, 1966). Using the exercises as warmup activities will certainly lead to students writing more (Jacobs, 1986) in addition to clearing their heads for other work undertaken in the same class (Elbow, 1981). Increasing the amount of writing assigned to Japanese college students is essential; they receive little instruction in how to write before they enter university, so frequent opportunities for writing must be provided if they are to recognize and produce the rhetorical conventions of English expository writing.

Another advantage of this technique is that it encourages students to think in English. According to Lane and Perrin (1984), a time limitation does not allow students to compose in their native language and then translate. For this reason, this technique may be especially effective in helping some Japanese learners to overcome their unproductive habit of translating word for word when they write English.

According to Bowen et al (1985), timed writing exercises seem to relieve some of the stress that students associate with writing. Discarding such anxiety results in promoting writing practice and subsequent improvement.

Overcoming the dread and dismay associated with writing in English also enables students to become better prepared for test situations. For example, the TOEFL now contains the Test of Written English,

which requires examinees to "1) compare and contrast two opposing points of view and defend a position in favor of one, or 2) describe and interpret a chart or graph," (Stansfield and Webster, 1986). Clarke and Walker (1980) contend that practicing writing rapidly benefits student ability to do well on essay-type examinations. Grohe (1988) holds that students must write in a deductive, linear way to score highly on the TOEFL expository essay and I would add they must do it rapidly. Timed writing activities may be effective in improving the confidence of Japanese students, who have an unfortunate tendency to underestimate their own language ability.

To summarize, there are a number of advantages of the timed writing activity. It is a good way to encourage novice writers to overcome their so-called writer's block and consider content more than form at the beginning stages of writing. The activity gives students much needed opportunities to write, which may lead to an improvement in the quality of their writing. As a warm-up activity at the start of class, the technique effectively promotes thinking in English, and increases confidence. Finally, the activity indirectly helps students prepare for writing tests on English proficiency examinations.

THE CLASSROOM BACKGROUND

The University of the Ryukyus is a national university which attracts high quality students in Okinawa prefecture. The activities I will describe take place in English Composition I and II, compulsory classes for sophomore English majors.

The classes meet almost 3.5 hours a week in two 100-minute sessions. About 30 students attend each class.

The main objective of English Composition I and II is to develop the ability to write according to the basic conventions of English expository prose. For example, students learn to recognize and produce topic sentences and controlling ideas at the sentence level and common organizational patterns (comparison, description, explanation, etc.) at the paragraph level.

The English proficiency of the students ranges from low intermediate to advanced. They seem motivated to learn how to write English well because many see writing as a practical skill. However, many of my students suffer from the previously mentioned problems common among Japanese learners so I assert practice in writing faster is appropriate to address those troubles.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE EXERCISES

Bowen et al (1985) suggest that *limited timed writing* (sic) is an effective exercise for increasing writing speed. The steps are as follows.

1. Select a two-sided issue familiar to the students.[2]
2. In small groups, students discuss the topic in order to share ideas for about five minutes.
3. While they talk, the teacher circulates to answer questions and stimulate lagging discussions. The instructor also writes on the board the various words, phrases and ideas that arise during the talk.
4. Students are given two minutes to collect their thoughts.
5. They write as much as they can in seven (Bowen's suggestion) to ten (my suggestion) minutes.
6. Collect and check for style, content, and structural accuracy of sentences.

Bowen et al (1985) also suggest that timed writing can be practiced by transforming information from graphs and tables into prose. Newspapers and magazines provide a plethora of statistical data about Japan that students can explain in English.[3] Of course, data from Japanese sources should be

translated and perhaps even redrawn for the sake of clarity. Vocabulary help can be given, as can discussion time. An example based on data from the newspaper Okinawa Times (1988) is in Appendix A.

A related exercise is to use pictures and diagrams to stimulate writing ideas. Students base explanations, comparisons, contrasts, or narratives on photographs, art reproductions, drawings, or diagrams. My teaching experience has shown, for example, that students often enjoy explaining both American and Japanese comic strips. Indeed, Japanese *manga* sometimes contain much cultural content which must be clarified for foreigners. So, writing an explanation goes beyond mere narration of action to more abstract (and thus challenging) deliberation of culturally conditioned behavior.[4]

Finally, short newspaper and magazine articles on familiar and interesting topics can be used for discussion and writing. After receiving a copy of the article, individuals are called on to read a sentence each, and new words are dealt with by eliciting synonyms from the rest of the class. Next, students discuss possible answers to the questions posed. Finally, they write for 10 minutes. The example in Appendix B is based on a short article from the Ryukyu Shinpo (1988), a daily newspaper which publishes a short news summary in English every Saturday in the evening edition.

These are only four examples of various timed writing exercises. Composition teachers have developed exercises that call for students to retell stories such as Urashima Taroo or Momotaroo (Brown, 1986), to complete a paragraph after a topic sentence is given (Bowen et al, 1985), or to create a story from a list of nouns (Knepler, 1984).

CHECKING CRITERIA AND METHODS

The students in English Composition I and II do timed writing exercises at least once a week as a warm-up activity.[5] I assure the students that their work will be commented on, but not graded. Thus, when students get their work back in the next class, their papers do not have the usual discouraging red marks. Instead, typed comments are made on the content of the writing. Following the advice of Raimes (1983), Moneyhun (1987), and Walter (1987), I generally remark on ideas by praising appropriate content, giving personal responses, and being as encouraging as possible. When the work contains incorrect content or the novice writer needs motivation, I address these issues with direct criticism.

As the term progresses and the students begin to learn and follow the rhetorical conventions of expository writing, I comment more specifically on the issue of organization. While I read student work, I keep in mind the following questions:

1. Does the paragraph contain a topic sentence, and if so, does that sentence have a controlling idea?
2. How much information is conveyed in the paragraph?
   How much is re-statement and repetition?
3. Has the student demonstrated an understanding of the current unit's organizational pattern (comparison, contrast, etc.)?
4. Does the paragraph contain a conclusion sentence? Is it a paraphrase of the topic sentence? Does it make a prediction?

Clear expository writing must possess structural accuracy at the sentence level. Therefore, as the weeks go by, I note the simplicity or complexity of sentences. My impression is that most students come to write longer, more clearly formed sentences with main clauses and a number of modifying clauses. This is a remarkable achievement, considering how many of them constantly wrote sentences in an unwavering Subject-Verb-Object pattern. I also check how the use of transitional devices (coordinating

conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, parallel structures) are contributing to smooth, coherent writing.

Furthermore, the length and fluency of the writing are also noted. In my written comments, I answer the following questions:

1. Is the writer producing longer paragraphs?
2. Is the writer producing longer sentences more competently ?
3. Is the work beginning to read like the expository writing of a native speaker?
4. Is the writer still slow? What factors could account for the student's lack of speed?

Students must keep all their written work in a folder and I urge them to peruse their collected work in order to see for themselves the improvement of their ability to express more ideas in less time. This is an effective confidence builder.

Finally, what is not checked should also be mentioned. Spelling errors, punctuation, and other mechanical errors are not marked. And, unless they occur so often as to impair meaning greatly or are likely to produce deep irritation in a reader, grammatical errors (for instance, subject/verb agreement, articles, and prepositions) should be neither marked nor corrected. Lexical difficulties should not be dealt with while checking.

PROBLEMS

From the viewpoint of a number of students, the most serious drawback to this activity is that their style of learning English demands less pressure and more time than the nature of this activity allows. I urge these learners to persevere, and to finish or rewrite the activity in their journal at their own pace. This allowance seems to satisfy those who are anxious about and ashamed of their lack of fluency. Unfortunately, the hard truth is that there is a minority of students who never seem to increase their writing speed because of over-dependence on translating and the Japanese-English dictionary, or fear of making syntactic or semantic errors, or sluggish reluctance to exert themselves in any serious or constructive way.

From the teacher's point of view, there is only one major problem concerning this activity, but it is certainly a main consideration. As the activity is given at least once a week, the checking load can become quite burdensome very quickly, particularly in composition classes in which there are journals, regular compositions, and conferences. Establishing a rational balance between giving students many opportunites to write, but avoiding teacher-burnout from the resulting explosion of paperwork is rather difficult, but experienced teachers can develop methods to comment on and return the exercises in a reasonable length of time.

STUDENT REACTIONS

In February, 1989 and 1990, a total of 55 English Composition II students anonymously answered a questionnaire on the exercises they had written during the previous term. Over 80% of the respondents felt that the exercises helped them to write faster, to practice writing topic sentences and controlling ideas, to organize their ideas for writing, and to improve their writing ability in general. When asked what problems they had when doing the exercises, 44% said they rarely had enough time to finish writing and 29% said they had vocabulary problems. When asked if the exercises were checked and commented on enough, 69% replied 'yes.'

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Further research should be undertaken to determine if these activities are indeed appropriate for EFL/SL learners, as most of the research so far has studied the effects of these exercises on the writing proficiency of native speakers (Jacobs, 1986). Other potentially useful research might be to ascertain if quantity does lead to quality, as Briere (1966) accepts, but Krashen (1984) does not. Future researchers can also investigate what learning strategies language students employ while they write a foreign or second language.

Much research remains, but from my experience I contend these timed writing exercises are worthwhile for two reasons. For one, most of my composition students believed that the exercises helped them improve their writing in various ways. Their perception of their own improvement is important because it indicates an increase of both ability and confidence. For another, as the weeks of a semester pass, I myself note improvement in my students' writing speed, organization, use of topic sentences and controlling ideas, and command of styles of expository English.

NOTES

I wish to thank Mr. Michael Smith of the Okinawa Prefecture Human Resources Development Foundation Language Center for his valuable editorial suggestions which prompted a complete overhaul of the first draft. I must also thank Mr. Daniel Castelaz of the Taipei American School for his pertinent albeit relentless criticism of the second and third drafts. Of course, any remaining errors of either judgement or mechanics are my responsiblity.

1　Timed writing exercises and quickwriting ought to be distinguished. In the former technique, students must produce tolerably clear expositions as quickly as possible, and teachers mark the work according to a predetermined set of standards. But in the latter, students produce loose, unrestrained writing to generate ideas, and teachers do not mark the resulting quickwrites.

2　Some typical issues my students have written about include the following: Part-time jobs are good (bad) for university students; Owning a car has various advantages and disadvantages; It is (not) a man's job to help with housework; Living in a house or an apartment—Which is better?

3　This is essential practice for not only writing, as I assert the cause of the internationalization of Japan will be advanced by helping Japanese students develop the ability to explain their culture in English to befuddled foreigners (Kresovich, 1988b).

4　See Seelye (1984) for a fine discussion outlining how to use authentic materials in cultural instruction, especially Chapter 8, "Asking the Right Questions."

5　Every class begins with ten minutes of journal writing as a reasonably productive way of waiting for the invariable stragglers late for class. The next 15 to 20 minutes are given to timed writing or sentence combining exercises. For an excellent overview of the latter, see Shortreed and Kelly, 1983; for a brief description of how I use them in class, see Kresovich, 1989.

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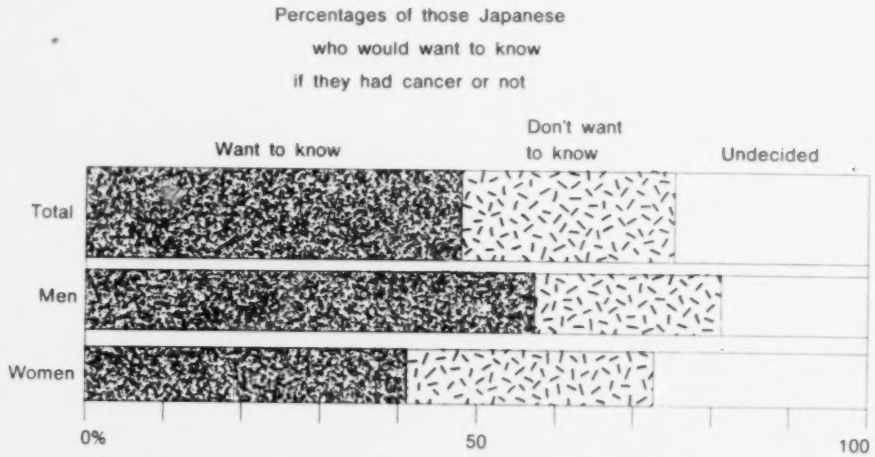
Appendix A

Look at the graph below and explain its figures in a few sentences.

Would you want your doctor or family to inform you if you had cancer? Why or why not? Give clear reasons.



Source : Health Insurance Association (February, 1988)

Appendix B

Read the following item from the Ryukyu Shinpo (1988. 10. 15).

The Education Ministry's 1987 physical strength/athletics survey has some surprising findings. Released on October 9, just before Sports Day, the survey reports women in their mid-30s and over have greatly improved their physical strength. However, the health of young people seems feeble and this downward trend has continued for the past 10 years. The survey was a sports/strength test carried out among 73,000 males and females aged 6–59 between last May and October.

Discuss the following questions with a partner. One, why are women in their mid–30s and over among the healthiest people in Japan? Two, why aren't the young (such as high school students) healthier?

Take 10 minutes to write a short paragraph, telling what the survey found and the reasons behind the surprising findings.